

Nagin outlines options in wake of raids - Brake- - Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - August 6, 2002 - page 01

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New Orleans' three brake-tag stations, closed since the start of Mayor Ray Nagin's crackdown on alleged corruption in city government two weeks ago, will remain closed for another 30 days, Nagin said Monday.

His administration will spend the month seeking to identify the most efficient and effective way to perform vehicle inspections, Nagin said. One option is privatizing the operation, as most cities and parishes in the state do.

The city's Utilities Department, which oversaw the inspection stations, will remain dormant for another 90 days, with its duties distributed among other city agencies, Nagin said. His administration is considering asking the City Council to abolish the department.

Nagin shut down the brake-tag stations July 22 after several employees were charged with taking bribes. The corruption appeared so pervasive that Nagin decided to close the entire operation temporarily while the investigation continued, a spokesman said.

New Orleans, Kenner and Westwego are the only Louisiana cities that issue their own brake tags. Elsewhere, the state licenses private mechanics and service stations to perform the task.

Motorists will not be ticketed for expired brake tags as long as the stations remain closed.

70 people arrested

Nagin dismissed suggestions that the 2-week-old investigation has more to do with politics than fighting corruption. "That allegation has no basis," he said. "I came to this office with very little political baggage. I don't need to play those games."

To date, 70 people, including 13 city employees, have been arrested in connection with alleged wrongdoing at the Taxicab Bureau and brake-tag stations. Most of those arrested are cab drivers.

Nagin declined comment about the police raid Thursday on the offices of the Department of Safety and Permits, except to say that officials wanted to make sure no evidence of possible wrongdoing was destroyed. Asked if they succeeded, he said, "We're in good shape."

He said employees in all city departments "should not be destroying documents or deleting files."

The Utilities Department was shut down July 22 when Lillian Regan, its director, was fired and Brian Cain, the deputy director, was arrested on charges of malfeasance in office and maintaining or filing false public records.

Duties distributed

Chief Administrative Officer Kimberly Williamson said the department's functions have been reassigned this way:

-- The Safety and Permits Department will be responsible for the Taxicab Bureau and its duties, such as inspecting vehicles, holding administrative hearings for drivers, and renewing taxi and other for-hire vehicle licenses, officially known as certificates of public necessity and convenience. The administration is considering having the Civil Service Department grade the tests that would-be cab drivers must pass.

-- The Finance Department will be responsible for **utility** regulatory issues, supervision of audits and financial management of the city's franchise agreements with Entergy, BellSouth and Cox Communications.

-- The Public Works Department will be responsible for maintaining street lights, including replacing burned-out bulbs.

-- The Property Management Department will be responsible for cable installations within City Hall and lease agreements for public utilities' use.

-- The Office of Communications will be responsible for the government access channel on cable TV.

After 90 days, the administration will review the effectiveness of the reassignment plan and make recommendations to the City Council for permanent changes, if any, Williamson said.

Nagin said he will appoint a blue-ribbon committee, including cab drivers, cab company officials and other people with knowledge about the industry, to review long-term changes to the Taxicab Bureau.

He said he is considering several people, including former Taxicab Bureau Director Jesse Bridges, to head the bureau or a successor agency.

Questions about Regan

Nagin and other officials joining him for a noon news conference were peppered with questions about Regan, who was arrested July 24 and booked on seven counts of malfeasance in office for waiving \$50 semiannual inspection fees and \$2-per-day late penalties for seven cab drivers.

On Friday, a Criminal District Court magistrate judge ruled that police did not have enough evidence to arrest Regan. Although police said she did not have the authority to waive the fees, Judge Gerard Hansen said nothing in the law prohibited her from doing so.

Hansen's ruling meant that Regan, who had been free on her own recognizance on a \$14,000 bond, could no longer be held on bail on the malfeasance charges, but it does not block District

Attorney Harry Connick's office from prosecuting her.

Asked if the administration plans to press the charges against Regan, City Attorney **Charles Rice** said that decision is up to Connick's office.

Police Superintendent Eddie Compass said he thinks his officers "made the right decision" in arresting Regan, but cautioned that her case is only a small part of the overall investigation of governmental corruption. "We're looking at hundreds and hundreds of complaints," he said.

Asked if Hansen's decision has hurt the credibility of the overall investigation, Nagin repeated his statement of two weeks ago that "a battle for the soul of New Orleans" is under way, adding, "We're in one of the initial phases" of that battle. "This is not about Ms. Regan," he said. "It's about a department that was out of sync with what we need to do."

Although Regan has said she initiated the investigation of corruption in her department last fall, Nagin said she must be held accountable for what happened during the eight years she led the department.

Nagin said he may seek to cancel some contracts signed by former Mayor Marc Morial in his final months in office, but that he is still trying to find out what all those contracts are.

He said Kristina Ford's \$120,000-per-year contract to run the New Orleans Building Corp. is "somewhat problematical" because of its three-year term and the fact that it doesn't give the board of the corporation the right to cancel it, but he did not say he will try to replace Ford.

City Council President Eddie Sapir and Councilwoman Jacquelyn Brechtel Clarkson appeared with Nagin at the news conference, but neither spoke.

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Bruce Egger can be reached at

begger@timespicayune.com or (504) 826-3320."

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